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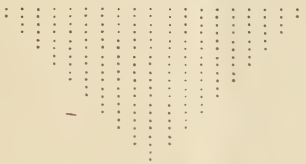
Nancy Hanks Lincoln

A SERMON



Delivered at All Souls Church, Chicago,
February Eight, Nineteen Hundred and Three

By JENKIN LLOYD JONES

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NANCY HANKS LINCOLN.

A Sermon by Jenkin Lloyd Jones, Delivered in All Souls Church, Chicago, February 8, 1903.

Mrs. Caroline Hanks Hitchcock, of Cambridge, Mass., has recently published a little book entitled "Nancy Hanks: the Story of Abraham Lincoln's Mother," which is the forerunner of a larger work promised on the genealogy of the Hanks family in America. The book already published, with the assurance it gives of the contents of the book unpublished, throws a flood of light on what was supposed to be a dark subject, and brings belated assurance that the law of heredity was not tricked in the birth of Abraham Lincoln. At last, tardily, the great son is given back into the arms of the little pioneer mother, too long deprived of the confidence and love of those who have honored and revered the son, although he himself, while still in obscurity, said to his partner, Herndon, "God bless my mother! All that I am or ever hope to be, I owe to her."

There is no sadder chapter in American history, no more disgraceful manifestation of the vulgarity, brutality, and malignity of political methods and the obliquity of politicians than the careless if not wilful dishonoring of the ancestry of Abraham Lincoln. The idle gossip of unlettered communities set agog by political bitterness, and making common cause with unscrupulous agitators, was mistaken for history by nearly all of those who hastened to meet the want of the hour in their hurried biographies of Abraham Lincoln. There is no lack of lives of the great President; each year adds to the already long shelf of Lincoln books in America; but obviously the true life of Abraham Lincoln is not yet written. We are too near our subject

to see him in his just perspective, and there has not been time for the careful search for records, sifting of evidence, and discovery of the great forces and facts which are always involved in the making of a great historical character. Perhaps when the real life of Abraham Lincoln is written, it will be found that the material for the history of his later years, the public career of the greatest President and captain of the greatest of armies has been reasonably compassed in the books now at hand. The ten splendid volumes by Nicolay and Hay, the life and correspondence, supplemented by the two great volumes of speeches, letters, and state papers of Abraham Lincoln, probably contain an amplitude of documents and most of the facts available, but certainly the chapters concerning Lincoln's fore-elders and early childhood must all be re-written. Even the later lives of Hapgood and Morse reiterate the old scandals of illegitimacy and uncertainties of birth and marital relations which are now utterly denied by conclusive documentary evidences found in courts of record.

This cloud of obscurity and distrust has hung most heavily over the name of Nancy Hanks, the mother of Abraham Lincoln. But today let it be gratefully noted that accurate historical researches have already brought about a vindication which must result in loving appreciation of this maligned and much-neglected name. This vindication has come largely through the diligent and fearless researches of three women, who in this work have merited and will ultimately receive the unmeasured gratitude, not only of the American people, but of all lovers of the race, all believers in human nature who rejoice in its noblest representatives.

I refer, first, to Mrs. C. S. Hobart Vawter, a relative of Vice-President Hobart, whose grandmother was Sarah Mitchell, of Kentucky, a kinswoman of Nancy Hanks. She it was who was instrumental in discovering the marriage bond of Thomas Lincoln and the marriage record of Jesse Head, the Methodist minister who officiated at the marriage of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks on June 17, 1806. Another of

these women is the Caroline Hanks Hitchcock, already mentioned, who took to herself the high task of discovering the Hanks family, thus throwing a flood of light upon the ancestry of Abraham Lincoln and consequently upon the foundations of his character and power.

The last of the three women referred to is Ida M. Tarbell, who, in her Life of Lincoln, has risen above the unfounded traditions and coarse implications of the earlier biographers. They, from lack of critical ability or ethical insight, mistook campaign gossip for evidence and idle tradition for history.

There is no doubt but that Lincoln went to his grave feeling that his own antecedents were hopelessly lost in the obscurity of the common people. In his blessed preoccupation and manly independence of tradition, inheritance, and public opinion, it probably never occurred to him to revise the statement made to Mr. J. L. Scripps, of the Chicago *Tribune*, in 1860, who compiled the first campaign biography. Said Lincoln:

"It is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of me or my early life. It can all be condensed into a single sentence, and that sentence we find in Gray's Elegy,

"'The short and simple annals of the poor.'

"This is my life, and that is all you or anybody else can make of it."

"And," adds the reporter, "Mr. Lincoln seemed painfully impressed with the extreme poverty of his early surroundings and the utter absence of all romantic and heroic elements."

It was better thus, perhaps, for this child of the backwoods. He was thrown back the more surely on the ultimate resources of his own manliness.

The American people have, in the main, taken literally Lowell's lines:

"For him her Old-World moulds aside she threw,
And choosing sweet clay from the breast
of the unexhausted West,
With stuff untainted shaped a hero new,
Wise, steadfast in the strength of God, and true."

Abraham Lincoln, in popular conception, was for

many years a nineteenth-century Melchisedec—"a prince of righteousness and King of Salem, without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, made like unto the Son of God, abiding a priest continually." At least the chief bit of autobiographical writing that we have from the great President was taken as final. This was furnished to his friend and yoke-fellow, Jesse W. Fell, of Bloomington, Ill., for campaign purposes in the year 1859. Mr. Fell was perhaps the most prophetic of the sons of Illinois, who hailed from afar the rising man of destiny. His vision was clear, even in the fifties. In this sketch Mr. Lincoln says:

"I was born Feb. 12, 1809, in Harding County, Kentucky. My parents were both born in Virginia of undistinguished families, second families, perhaps I should say. My mother, who died in my tenth year, was of the family of the name of Hanks, some of whom now remain in Adams and others in Macon Counties, Illinois. My paternal grandfather, Abraham Lincoln, migrated from Rockingham County, Virginia, to Kentucky, about 1771 or 1772, and a year or two later he was killed by Indians, not in battle but by stealth, when he was laboring to open a farm in the forest. His ancestors, who were Quakers, went to Virginia from Berks County, Pennsylvania. An effort to identify them with the New England family of the same name ended in nothing more definite than a similarity of Christian names in both families—such as Enoch, Levi, Mordecai, Solomon, Abraham and the like.

"My father at the death of his father was but six years of age, and he grew up literally without education. He removed from Kentucky to what is now Spencer County, Indiana, in my eighth year. We reached my new home about the time the State came into the Union. It was a wild region with bear and other wild animals still in the woods. There I grew up. There were some schools, so called, but no qualifications were ever required of a teacher beyond 'Readin', Writin', and Cipherin' to the Rule of Three.'"

Here ended the question of ancestry for Mr. Lincoln himself and his early biographers, but it has now been clearly established that the name of Lincoln was given him by an ancestry that settles soldidly into the best there is in New England life. They were among those who overflowed the Norwich jail in England because "they would not accept the ritual prepared for them by the bishop"; they pelted the tax-collector with stones, and finally, in order to "rid themselves of an odious government," they sailed away from Yarmouth Bay in 1636, and in due time founded the colony of Hingham. It was these Lincoln land-owners, blacksmiths, early iron masters, who sent their representatives southward into Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, and at last into Kentucky. The Abraham Lincoln who was fifth in descent from the Samuel Lincoln of England, and who had become owner of large tracts of wild land in Kentucky, fell by the treacherous bullet of a lurking Indian in the sight of his three boys —Mordecai, Joseph and Thomas, the latter a six-year-old boy who was saved by the timely crack of the rifle in the hands of the older brother, to become the father of the great Emancipator.

Thomas Lincoln was not the accident in human life, the irresponsible, unaccountable, and ne'er do well that even the sober biographers of Lincoln have amused themselves over. The true estimate of Thomas Lincoln has not yet been made.

But my present purpose is to try to put into our minds and hearts the obscure, neglected, unappreciated little mother, Nancy Hanks. Thanks to Mrs. Hitchcock, we now know that Hanks is a name nobody need be ashamed of. It has annals that are in themselves interesting written deep in the history of England and America. I rejoice that the greatest American wasted no time in pedigree-hunting. The pride of descent is poor capital. Life is too short to be wasted on genealogies for the sake of bolstering up family pride. But there is great joy in doing justice to the memory of the dead. Let those who have pitied the great Lincoln on account of his mother or written small her

place in the mystic line of causes that brought forth the beautiful mystery, hasten to repent and make amends.

The little woman who at thirty-five years of age placed her dying hand upon the head of nine-year-old Abraham away in the backwoods of Indiana, bore a name that has been traced back across the sea to the time of Alfred the Great, where two brothers of that name received "the commoners' rights in Malmsbury" for service rendered in defeating the Danes, and the name of King Athelstan, grandson of Alfred, is on the deed. Thomas Hanks, a descendant, who was a soldier under Oliver Cromwell, had a grandson who sailed from London to Plymouth, Mass., in 1699. This Benjamin Hanks was the father of twelve children, the third of whom was William, born February 11, 1704; William moved to Pennsylvania, and his son, John Hanks, married Sarah, a daughter of Cadwallader Evans and Sarah Morris. The record runs, "John Hanks, yeoman, Sarah Evans, spinster." A grandchild of this union was Joseph Hanks, who was borne southwestward with the tide of emigration inspired and in a large measure headed by Daniel Boone, whose story and whose blood are strangely intermingled with those of the large families of Shipleys, Hankses and Lincolns, who were much intermarried. This Joseph Hanks crossed the mountains with his family of eight children and herds of cattle and horses. He bought one hundred and fifty acres of land as his homestead near Elizabethtown, in Nelson County, Kentucky. The youngest of eight children in this migration was little Nancy, five years of age when they crossed the mountains. After four years of home-making in the wilderness, Joseph came to his death. His will, dated January 9, 1793, probated May 14, 1793, has been discovered, and a fac simile appears in Mrs. Hitchcock's book. It runs thus, somewhat abbreviated:

"In the name of God, amen. I, Joseph Hanks, of Nelson County, State of Kentucky, being of sound mind and memory but weak in body, calling to mind the frailty of all human nature, do make and demise

this, my last will and testament, in the manner and form following, to-wit:

"I give to my son Thomas one sorrel horse, called 'Major'; to Joshua the grey mare, 'Bonney'; to William the grey horse, 'Gilbert'; to Charles the roan horse, 'Tobe'; to Joseph the horse called 'Bald.'

"Also I give and bequeath unto my daughter Elizabeth one heifer called 'Gentle'; to Polly a heifer called 'Lady,' and to my daughter Nancy one heifer, yearling, called 'Peidy.' I give and bequeath unto my wife, Nanny, my whole estate during her life, afterwards to be divided among all my children."

This neglected document now reproduced in facsimile in Mrs. Hitchcock's book settles once and forever the legitimacy of the parentage of Nancy Hanks. She had a father who recognized his paternity in the thoughtful will of a prosperous pioneer. This in the eyes of the law as well as of public opinion establishes her place as a rightful child of honorable parents.

The mother survived but a few months. The story of all the children is promised in the forthcoming Hanks Genealogy by Mrs. Hitchcock. Enough for our present purpose to know that the little orphaned Nancy, now nine years old, found a home with her uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Berry, near Springfield, Ky., Mrs. Berry being her mother's sister and a member of the Shipley family. Here she lived a happy and joyous life until twenty-three years old, when Thomas Lincoln, who had learned his carpenter's trade of her uncle, Joseph Hanks, was married to her on June 17, 1806, according to official records already mentioned. The "marriage bond," to the extent of fifty pounds, required by the laws of Kentucky at that time, signed by Thomas Lincoln and Richard Berry, was duly recorded seven days before. This happy wedding was celebrated as became prosperous and well-meaning pioneers. The loving uncle and aunt gave an "infare" to which the neighbors were bidden. Dr. Graham, an eminent naturalist of Louisville, who died in 1885, wrote out his remembrances of that festival and

testified to the same before a notary in the 98th year of his age. He said:

"I know Nancy Hanks to have been virtuous, respectable and of good parentage, and I knew Jesse Head, Methodist preacher of Springfield, who performed the ceremony. The house in which the ceremony was performed was a large one for those days. Jesse Head was a noted man—able to own slaves, but did not on principle. At the festival there was bear meat, venison, wild turkey, duck, and a sheep that two families barbecued over the coals of wood burned in a pit and covered with green boughs to keep the juices in."

The traditions of the neighborhood say that Nancy's cheerful disposition and active habits were considered a dower among the pioneers. She was an adept at spinning flax, and in the spinning parties, to which ladies brought their wheels, Nancy Hanks generally bore off the palm, "her spools yielding the longest and finest thread."

The biographers agree that she was above her neighbors in education. She carried the traditions of schooling in Virginia with her over the mountains. She was a great reader; had Esop's Fables; loved the Bible and the hymn book; had a sweet voice, and loved to sing hymns.

The old neighbors remembered her as having "a gentle and trusting nature." A grandson of Joseph, an older brother of Nancy, said:

"My grandfather always spoke of his angel sister Nancy with emotion. She taught him to read. He often told us children stories of their life together."

The first child of Thomas and Nancy Lincoln was a daughter, Sarah. Three years after marriage came the boy, Abraham. Another son came and was named Thomas; he stayed but a few months, but long enough to touch permanently the heart of Abraham with a sense of tenderness and awe. Before they started for their new home in Indiana he remembered the mother taking her two little children by the hand, walking across the hills, and sitting down and weeping over the

grave of the little babe before she left it behind forever.

The story of that primitive home in Indiana has been told over and over again, but never with sufficient insight. Only pioneers can understand how piety and simplicity, trust and poverty, exposure and hospitality, inadequate clothing and meagerest diet, can go hand in hand with cheerful content.

Among the last recorded words of Nancy Lincoln was one of cheer. It was but a few days before her death when she went to visit a sick neighbor, the mother of one who was to become Rev. Allen Brooner, who tells the story. The neighbor was despondent and thought she would not live long. Said Mrs. Lincoln: "O you will live longer than I. Cheer up." And so it proved. The pestilential milk sickness was abroad, smiting men and cattle. Uncle Thomas and Aunt Betsy Sparrow both died within a few days of each other. Soon the frail but heroic little mother was smitten. Said a neighbor: "She struggled on day by day, but on the seventh day she died." There was no physician within thirty-five miles; no minister within a hundred miles. Placing her hand on the head of the little boy, nine years old, she left him her dying bequest, and the great President many years afterwards in a burst of confidence entrusted the message to the memory of Joshua A. Speed, one of his earliest and most intimate friends:

"I am going away from you, Abraham, and shall not return. I know that you will be a good boy; that you will be kind to Sarah and to your father. I want you to live as I have taught you and to love your Heavenly Father."

Thomas Lincoln, wise in wood lore and not without that culture that comes with the handicrafts, sawed the boards with his own whip-saw from the trees he felled and made the coffins with his own hands for the Sparrows and for his wife.

It was three months before Parson David Elkins came on horseback from the old Kentucky home, in response to the first letter that little Abraham ever

wrote, to stand under the trees by the grave and speak his word of loving remembrance and high appreciation of the departed and of consolation and hope to the neighbors who had gathered from far and near.

No reporter was there to take down the address, no camera was there to catch the picture, and no artist has risen to paint the scene, but it is one of the most touching events in American history.

"Stoop-shouldered," "thin-breasted" were the words used to describe her appearance in Indiana, but "bright, scintillating, noted for her keen wit and repartee," was a phrase used by those who knew her as a girl in the home of her foster parents, Uncle and Aunt Berry, in Kentucky.

"The little girl grew up into a sweet-tempered and beautiful woman, the center of all the country merry-making, a famous spinner and housewife," says Miss Tarbell. "I remember Nancy well at the wedding, a fresh looking girl," said Dr. Graham.

But who has a better right to characterize the mother who bore him than the great Lincoln himself? He describes her as "of medium stature, dark, with soft and rather mirthful eyes; a woman of great force of character, passionately fond of reading; every book she could get her hands on was eagerly read."

And why should she not be such? The Hanks blood was vital, aggressive, virile. Mrs. Hitchcock offers abundant facts to prove that "the mother of Abraham Lincoln belonged to a family which has given to America some of her finest minds and most heroic deeds."

This same Hanks family was a "remarkably inventive family. The first bell ever made in America was cast on Hanks Hill, in the old New England home. The first tower clock made in America, placed in the old Dutch church in New York City, was made by a Hanks. The bell that replaced the old Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, as well as the great Columbian bell, that was made from the relics of gold, silver, old coins and metals sent from all parts of the world, a bell which in addition to the old inscriptions of the Liberty Bell

added, "A new commandment I give unto you—that ye love one another," was cast by members of the Hanks family. The first silk mills in America were built by a Hanks. One of the founders of the American Bank Note Company was a Hanks. "Hanksite" is the name of a mineral named after the discoverer, a state mineralogist of California.

Lincoln used to say that his Uncle Mordecai, his father's oldest brother, "got away with all the brains of the family." He was a prominent member of the Kentucky legislature at one time. He was a famous story teller, and Thomas, the carpenter, was a favorite wherever he went. He was withy, though small of stature, a famous wrestler, and, when the provocation was adequate, a terrible foe in a fight.

All these traits appear in the President, but none the less perceptible is the inheritance from the mother's side. Mrs. Hitchcock's little book shows two portraits side by side—that of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 and the Rev. Stedman Wright Hanks, of Cambridge, Mass.—and the resemblance is so striking that one might readily be taken for the other.

No less marked were the characteristics of the Welsh Evanses and Morrises, whose blood flowed in the veins of Nancy Hanks, as shown in Coffin's life of Lincoln.

Says Noah Brooks in his life:

"Lincoln said that his earliest recollections of his mother were of his sitting at her feet with his sister, drinking in the tales and legends that were read and related to them by the house mother."

Let the land of Merlin rejoice, for, through this far-off child of the wilderness, it made its contribution of poetry, hope and tenderness to the life of the great Emancipator.

We have seen how the estates of his ancestors, while not insignificant, were untainted by claim of human chattels. He himself has told us that one reason why his parents left Kentucky was their antipathy to slavery. And Miss Tarbell has found evidence that in the old Lincoln home in Kentucky there were high debates

over the rights of man as set forth by Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine.

The records of the Lincoln ancestry on both sides were cruelly mutilated and for the most part destroyed by the vandal hands of the war of 1861-5; the war that ransacked court houses and made bonfires of records. They were broken into again by that inevitable abandonment of impedimenta that goes with successive generations of pioneers. They who go forth to conquer a new world must needs go in light marching order. Those fore elders of Lincoln took their souls along with them but left their records behind. In their zeal for the future they grew indifferent to the past. The present so absorbed them that they sacrificed their traditions.

Once more the Lincoln ancestry is obscured by the universal indifference to the feminine links in human descent. It will not always be so, for whatever her estimation may be in the statutes of men, woman has a legislative and executive place in the statutes of God, and she contributes her full quota towards the making of man—intellectually and spiritually as well as physically.

Lastly, the Lincoln traditions were broken upon the dead wall of slavery. The tides of New England life and European energy that traveled south and southwestward fared poorly compared with the same tides that traveled westward. It was not the Blue Ridge Mountains, but it was the black lines of slavery that held down and held back that enterprising blood and doomed to illiteracy that progeny of high ancestry. But that great wave of noble blood at last gathered strength in the zeal of Abraham Lincoln and his compatriots. They dashed themselves against the wall that had wellnigh wrecked them and battered it down, and public schools, free intercourse of man with man, the upward reach of the common people began to redeem the land and to restore the records and to vindicate the law of heredity. Then let us give to Nancy Hanks the place that belongs to her.

We of All Souls Church have set for ourselves the

high task of interpreting Abraham Lincoln in terms of institutional life, civic energy and religious liberty.

We have undertaken to build an Abraham Lincoln Centre across the way. Would that some one would see to it that there shall be one tender shrine, one mellowed and mellowing home corner within that building, that may lovingly and gratefully bear the name of Nancy Hanks Lincoln.

I wish this name might be related to an industry that shall touch the lives of generations of girls yet unborn with the benignant skill of home-making, the divine aptitudes of the fireside, the homely skill that made the pioneer fireside of Nancy Hanks Lincoln a training school for giants, a nursery of ideals, a haven for the wandering and the homeless. The day of the distaff and the skillet is gone; the Dutch oven, the open fireplace with its iron crane, are no longer parts of the household equipment or necessary elements in the training of a girl, but their equivalents remain, and home-making is still the finest of fine arts, the test of a woman's potency now as then, as it ought to be the ideal of a true woman's training now as then.

Much has been said of late about home-making; much attention has been given to schools of domestic science. I wish that such purposes might be touched with the patriotism, the historic truthfulness, the growing gratitude of humanity that rightfully goes with the name of Nancy Hanks Lincoln.

How benign in the Lincoln Centre would be a Nancy Hanks School of Domestic Arts. What a prophetic investment of money! What a high invitation to those to whom is entrusted the grave responsibilities of wealth! What a significant opportunity! What a rare chance for investing capital in a way that will bring sure, lasting, aye, everlasting returns! When some one thinks of it so deeply that the dream becomes a fact, then the vindication of Nancy Hanks will not only have been begun, but it will have been accomplished, at least in one little corner of this great country; in one Centre that shall radiate life to one group of the children who will thus become her unmeasured beneficiaries.

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